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Answering God's Interrogatories

Marlin K. Jensen

Trying to combine both religion and law, I have bravely entitled my remarks "Answering God's Interrogatories." I'm quite certain I would not know what an interrogatory was if I hadn't gone to law school. For those of you who are uninitiated, I wish to point out that interrogatories are questions—usually in writing—that parties to lawsuits ask each other for discovering what the opposing party's case is all about. More simply, the word *interrogatory* means a question. And for a long time, as I've read the scriptures, I've been impressed that one way God teaches us is through the questions he asks. We often call these rhetorical questions, which are questions asked for effect—for teaching effect, usually—with no answer expected. It's obvious that a Heavenly Father who knows all doesn't have much to discover, but we, his children, certainly do.

"Adam, Where Art Thou?"

It appears that this business of interrogatories began very early as Adam and Eve got into a little difficulty in the Garden of Eden. In calling Adam to account, God asked, "Adam, where art thou?" (Genesis 3:9). I've thought a lot about that question, and I don't think the Lord asked it because he didn't know where Adam was! He obviously wanted Adam to think about where he was and possibly about where he ought to be.

On this watershed day in your lives, may I ask you graduates to consider for a moment where you are? Is there a better way to determine that than by using gospel reference points—those eternal truths that are constant and sure?

Where are you, for example, concerning faith? Is it stronger and more evident in your life than when you began your legal education? It would be

a sad day if what you lost during your law school experience was far more important than what you've gained.

Where are you with prayer? Are you like my associate in the Quorums of Seventy who, when the opening hymn was announced in our weekly meeting as "Ere You Left Your Room This Morning, Did You Think to Pray?" winked at me and jokingly said, "Well, I thought about it!" How would we feel if we thought President Hinckley didn't say his daily prayers? Aren't our loved ones entitled to the same expectation on our part?

Where are you concerning the scriptures—God's word? Does section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants mean more to you than and is it as well understood as section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code? Remember that 25 years from today section 76 will remain unamended and in force. We can hardly offer the same assurances for section 501(c)(3)!

Where are you with reference to your spouse, if you are married, and to your family members? Several years ago I had the experience of interviewing 30 or so men in an effort to call a new stake president in central Utah. Among those interviewed were two brothers serving on the high council. When we asked the first one for three men he could recommend we consider, he told us that when his brother and he had been helping their widowed mother that morning with yard work, the thought occurred to him that his brother was the best man, the kindest man in the stake, and ought to become the new stake president. His brother was his only recommendation! When that brother came in next for his interview, his answer to our question was essentially the same. He recommended the first brother! As I drove home the next day I couldn't help wondering what my brothers would have said about me in that situation—or what my wife and children might have said.

I think there are many other implications of God asking where we are. One that has meaning for me is best described in Joseph Smith's History, verse 29. Joseph records that he retired to bed for the night and then, he says, "I betook myself to prayer and supplication to Almighty God for forgiveness of all my sins and follies." Then he makes this interesting statement: "And also for a manifestation to me, that I might know of my state and standing before him." In a sense, isn't that the question God was posing to Adam? "Where are you, Adam? Where have you been? Where are you going? What is your state and standing before me?" As I've thought about it, I don't know that there is a more profitable question for us to ask, especially in our prayers. If we really are brave, maybe we'd even ask that of our spouse or a close friend. I did that not long ago. I said, "Honey, how am I doing?" Kathy said, "Well, I think you're nicer than you used to be." I suppose you'd have to know what a scoundrel I was to appreciate how far I've come. Sometimes you can get that kind of feedback from people who really love you.

But getting feedback from God is even more helpful; and could there be a higher purpose for personal revelation than to have God answer our prayers and reveal to us where we lack—where we really are, so to speak? Then we can go to work on ourselves and our deficiencies and really do some good!

“What Is Property unto Me?”

A second helpful interrogatory posed by God is contained in section 117 of the Doctrine and Covenants. This is a verse directed to the Church land agents who were purchasing Church property in Missouri. The Lord says to them, “Let them repent of all their sins, and of all their covetous desires, before me, saith the Lord.” The question is then asked: “For what is property unto me? saith the Lord” (v. 4). What a useful question for those of you poised to become generators of legal fees!

Then, as he often does when he asks these questions—or poses these interrogatories—the Lord provides the answer. He says:

Have I not the fowls of heaven, and also the fish of the sea, and the beasts of the mountains? Have I not made the earth? Do I not hold the destinies of all the armies of the nations of the earth?

Therefore, will I not make solitary places to bud and to blossom, and to bring forth in abundance? saith the Lord.

Is there not room enough on the mountains of Adam-ondi-Ahman, and on the plains of Olaha Shinehah [that little valley that stretches out in front of Spring Hill], or the land where Adam dwelt, that you should covet that which is but a drop [That’s what property is unto our Lord: a drop!] and neglect the more weighty matters? (D&C 117:6–8)

What are the weightier matters? He mentions some of them in the book of Matthew: judgment, mercy, faith. These are attributes a good lawyer can’t afford to neglect.

Some years ago I was invited to lunch with a young man who was a bishop in a humble area of Salt Lake City. He was also a well-known corporate attorney and had a good job making probably somewhere between \$90,000 and \$100,000 a year. During the luncheon, in a very thoughtless way, I said to him, “When will you and your family be moving from your current home?” He looked at me with a surprised and hurt look on his face and said, “Why do you ask?” I said, “Well, I just assumed that as well as you’re doing, you’d be moving soon to a more prosperous part of our city.” He responded, “On the contrary. My wife and I have made a very conscious decision to live where we live and to share the surplus that we have with those around us who really need it.” Boy, did I beat a hasty retreat! Here was someone who really did believe that property doesn’t mean much to the Lord, who was planning his life and acting accordingly.

Isn't our best answer to God's interrogatories given by how we live? That would be our best response. So let me pose a hypothetical case or two. If we really felt about property the way the Lord defines it—that it's but a drop and that there are far more weighty matters—then if we were trying to make a decision about material things, wouldn't our feelings about this subject influence that decision? For example, let's say you were fortunate enough to inherit \$25,000 from a grandmother who just passed away and had something to bequeath to you, because she did something you struggle to do—save. If you received such a sum, would you spend the entire amount on the new car you've wanted for so long? Or would you buy a reliable used car from your neighbor for \$8,000 and use the excess funds helping those around you who are struggling financially and have many unmet needs? Or let's say you are making a decision about building a home and would like the very best and finest for your family. Would you build one you could reasonably afford for \$110,000, or would you build a more palatial one for \$225,000 and spend the next 30 years working 12-hour days, possibly requiring the help of a working spouse, to pay for it? This is obviously an interrogatory with very practical implications for our lives.

“Unto What Were Ye Ordained?”

This next interrogatory comes from section 50 of the Doctrine and Covenants. “Wherefore, I the Lord ask you this question—unto what were ye ordained?” (v. 13). Now you sisters may think this doesn't apply to you, but it does. In a sense we have all been foreordained. And what was that foreordination? In verse 14 the Lord answers his own question again: “To preach my gospel by the Spirit, even the Comforter which was sent forth to teach the truth.” This brings to mind the Abrahamic covenant. All of us have covenanted with God. As we become partakers of the gospel and receive the wonderful blessings that are part of Abraham's covenant, we enter into a serious obligation—even a burden—to become an agent people for God. Our covenant is to share the gospel so the families of this earth will come to know about Christ and his plan for our lives.

William J. Cameron has written beautifully about this idea.

A man will rise and demand, “By what right does God choose one race of people above another?” I like that form of the question. It is much better than asking by what right God degrades one people beneath another, although that is implied. God's grading is always upward. If He raises up a nation, it is that other nations may be raised up through its ministry. If He exalts a great man, an apostle of liberty, or science, or faith, it is that He might raise a degraded people to a better condition. The Divine selection [of which we are the beneficiaries] is not a prize, a compliment paid to the man or the race—it is a burden imposed. To appoint a chosen people is not a pandering to the racial vanity

of a “superior people;” it is a yoke bound upon the necks of those who are chosen for a special service.¹

We are such a covenant people, and I think it’s very helpful to constantly ask ourselves the question “Unto what were [we] ordained?” Can you see the implications this has, for instance, for our duty to spread the gospel?

For example, I’ve just been amazed by the experiences I’ve had when flying. I usually sit in an aisle seat and introduce myself to my seatmate. I ask him about himself, hoping that he’ll ask me about myself and that somehow out of that a gospel conversation will ensue. Often, over the past eight years, the Lord has helped me find a way to share the gospel. It’s a rare weekend that I come back not having made a contact that I can follow up on in some way—a referral or sending a book or something. When I’m in those situations, I just have a little prayer in my heart: “Father, I don’t know if this person will be receptive, but I do know that maybe he’ll never have a better chance to meet a Latter-day Saint and to hear a little bit about the gospel. Please help me find a way to share it.”

In the back of my mind I’m thinking that this is my burden, my opportunity, and my obligation as a member of God’s covenant people. That’s what I was ordained to do. This is what all of us are ordained to do. So, again, God’s interrogatory can be very helpful by working itself out in practical ways. I hope considerations such as these have had some impact on your postgraduate planning.

“What Think Ye of Christ?”

Finally, I share my favorite interrogatory. Christ posed it to the Pharisees in Matthew 22:42. You’ll recognize it. He said to them simply, “What think ye of Christ? whose Son is he?” I constantly ask myself, What do I think of him? Am I truly Christian? I’ve always said to my wife, “I’m the theologian, honey, you’re the Christian.” Is being a Christian more than just theology? Isn’t it really something that has to do with our behavior? Are we Christians? We’ve all recently read about a young man in Tennessee who was a member of the Federation of Christian Athletes. He was selected to receive his high school’s FCA Male Athlete of the Year award and then was denied the award because, as a member of our Church, he was not considered a Christian.² Are we Christian? What and who defines that?

In a 1951 conference talk, President McKay said, “What you sincerely in your heart think of Christ will determine what you are, will largely determine what your acts will be.”³ That is a beautiful and sobering thought, relating directly to the interrogatory “What think [we] of Christ?” In our lives, how can we demonstrate what we think of him?

One way would be to repent more continuously. We recently served a mission in New York. One day, in an interview with a missionary, something

happened that let me know what he thought of Christ. He had been on his mission 15 months, and that morning during our interview he asked, "Do you have a little extra time?" And I said, "Sure." He said, "Well, I'm going to do something today that I really should have done almost two years ago, but I didn't have the faith in Christ to do it."

Then he poured out his heart about a transgression that occurred long before his mission call. His first pre-mission interview was with his bishop, who also happened to be his father (a complicating factor). He was not able to tell his father what he had done. Adam had that same problem, remember? I think that might be why God asked, "Where art thou?" Well, God knew where Adam was. He was hiding. That's what most of us do when we disobey God. And when that doesn't work, we often do just what Adam did. We blame someone. "The woman, she . . ." And then Eve's response, "The serpent, he . . ." It is so easy and natural to excuse our weaknesses this way.

But on that morning this young elder was ready to level with the Lord. So, in deep humility he said, "I didn't feel this way two years ago, but I know now that there is no way around what I'm going to do." He quoted the scripture "By this shall ye know if a man hath repented of his sins; behold, he will confess them and forsake them" (D&C 58:43). Then he said, "There are things more important than finishing my mission, and one of them is to have my sins forgiven. I know I've got to confess to get this started, so here goes." And out it came. Oh, how I loved him. I cried with him, and I knew that his faith in Christ was to the level described by the Book of Mormon as "faith unto repentance" (Alma 34:15). There are levels of faith, and when we've only got a "particle of faith" (Alma 32:27) we don't do what this young missionary did. But when our faith grows to the level of "faith unto repentance," then in our minds and in our hearts we say, "I really believe that the Atonement works and that there is no other way." Then we bring ourselves into compliance and pay the price and claim the blessings.

What did this young missionary think of Christ? It was clear. He knew Christ was his Redeemer. He knew there was no other way, and he was willing to be completely submissive to the processes of repentance.

What else would we do if we really thought the way we should about Christ? I think we would be very charitable in our treatment of others. The quality of our daily relationships with others is the best indication of what we think about Christ. Elder Marvin J. Ashton said once that how we treat others is the best measure of how we're doing in our efforts to come unto Christ.⁴ In our quest to come unto him, how we relate daily with our family and with our associates gives the best evidence about how we really feel about the Savior.

Can you imagine what a difference it will make if you practice law with Christ and his teachings in your heart and on your mind each day? I actively practiced for 20 years and received some wonderful financial rewards. My

most memorable fees, though, are the banana cream pies I used to bill and receive from the widows of our ward for services rendered!

I'll end here, though God has posed many other interrogatories. "Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have than from God?" (D&C 6:23). "What manner of men ought ye to be?" (3 Nephi 27:27). "Many are called and few are chosen. And why are they not chosen?" (D&C 121:34). I hope you can value these and many other questions. They merit our contemplation. More than that, they merit our faithful response in the way we live our lives.

The use of such interrogatories by a loving and wise Heavenly Father guides us. The technique enables him to raise relevant issues, to encourage our thoughtful analysis of them, and then to leave us to the exercise of our agency to act. It sounds almost lawyerlike; but I would prefer to describe the process as godlike, because through it we may become more like him. Wouldn't that be a wonderful outcome of a life in the law?

God bless you all to succeed on those terms—his terms! In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

This convocation address was given April 25, 1997, when Elder Jensen's son, Matthew, graduated from the BYU Law School. Reprinted from "Where Art Thou? Answering God's Interrogatories," Clark Memorandum, Fall 1997, 2-7.

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Notes

1. William J. Cameron, *The Covenant People* (Merrimac, MA: Destiny Publishers, 1966), 8.
2. "'Christian' Athletic Group Denies Award to Mormon," *Deseret News*, 26 April 1996, B1. See also "Christian Group Apologizes for Way It Handled LDS Incident," *Deseret News*, 27 April 1996, B12.
3. David O. McKay, "Highest of All Ideals," *Conference Report*, April 1951, 93-94, as quoted in *Gospel Ideals* (Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1953), 34.
4. Marvin J. Ashton, "The Tongue Can Be a Sharp Sword," *Ensign*, May 1992, 20.